

## ***“Life on the Vine”***

*John 15:1-13*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 2, 2015

If you were here last week then you remember that we talked about the plague of frogs that God went to Egypt and we looked at how God is calling us, much like he did Pharaoh, to surrender our lives completely to follow and serve Him. Often we say we want to follow Christ completely, but, like Pharaoh, we end up saying, “tomorrow.” But God wants us to spend today with Him.

Many scholars have pointed out that the grand theme of the Bible is about life *with* God. Right at the beginning in Genesis God creates the first humans and then He plants a garden for them to live in. We’re told that God would come and walk with them in the cool of the day. God wants to be *with* Adam and Eve. Later on He calls Abraham to spend His life with God. We’re told that God is with Isaac and Jacob. Here’s where it gets interesting. When Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, we’re told that God is with him. Later on when he’s in prison the Bible says that God is with him in prison, too. Wherever you find yourself in life you can be *with God* there – in your family, at work, in church, even in prison. Wherever you are, God invites you to live life with Him today.

So this morning we want to talk about how we go about actually living every day with God. You can choose to spend your time *with* God or *without* God, but as we will see, living life with God is really living and the life without God leads to death.

To help his disciples understand this *with God* life, Jesus tells this parable about grapes. He has just finished eating the Passover meal with them in the upper room. Earlier in the evening he surprised them by washing their feet and then Judas left to betray him. Jesus begins telling them that the end is near and that they will not be together for much longer. At the end of chapter 14 Jesus says “let’s get out of here” and they head toward the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

Somewhere along the way he stops and says, “I am the true vine.”

This is more than just a simple metaphor that Jesus is using. The grapevine is a common image in the Old Testament for the nation of Israel. Psalm 80 says, “You brought a vine out of Egypt. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.” In fact, the image of Israel as a vine was so important to them that in the Temple, over the entrance to the Holy Place, was a carving of a grape vine. The problem was, as we read about in places like Isaiah 5, that Israel became more like a wild vine than a cultivated vineyard. They failed to bear the fruit God wanted from them.

You probably don’t think very often about how grapes are grown. When I was growing up we pretty much ate plain old white grapes from the grocery store. I knew there were red ones of course but we didn’t eat those, probably because they had seeds. White seedless grapes were about the limit of my grape world. But I had this friend who lived out in the country and his parents one year decided to start growing grapes. They built a large trellis and planted several different kinds of grapes. I still remember the first time I tasted one of the grapes they had grown. They didn’t grow plain old white seedless grapes. They had Concord grapes. I’d never anything like them. They looked different. They were a very different color. And you had to peel them! The other thing I remember is that they spent a lot of time growing grapes. It was a lot of work.

A few years ago we had the opportunity to visit a winery and I learned a lot more about how grapes are grown, which is not very different than the way they were grown in ancient times. The grapes are planted in long rows along a low trellis. It’s really more like a fence. When Jesus talks about the vine maybe the image you get in your mind is a long, trailing vine. But grape vines are different. Each grape plant grows up into a thick, woody trunk.

That's what's called the vine. Out of that vine grow the branches, which are more like what we would think of as a vine. The branches grow in both directions along the trellis. The important thing to know about growing grapes is that they will only produce fruit on new growth. They must be pruned in order to get fruit and so the vinedresser goes up and down the rows, cutting out the unhealthy branches and pruning the healthy ones. Jesus says that we are like those branches and God the Father is the vinedresser. He is describing for us life with God.

Jesus is real clear that his followers are to produce fruit. Sometimes we forget that. We think that if we have the salvation thing taken care of that's enough. If we make it to church on Christmas and Easter and maybe once or twice during the rest of the year we're pretty much good. This passage reminds us, rather strongly, that every branch that does not bear fruit gets taken away and burned. So the first question is ...what is the fruit that God expects from us? In a nutshell, the fruit that God wants from you is a transformed life. He wants to be *with* you.

Our human nature is NOT to want to be with God, so when we want to be with Him, that's a pretty good sign that He's at work in your life. In Galatians 5 the Apostle Paul gives us kind of a comparison of the not-God life and the with-God life. He basically says, "the fruit of God working in your life is that you less rivalry and dissension and gossip and anger and drunkenness and lust in your life and they're being replaced with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Which of those lists more closely describes your life? Where do you need to ask God to work?

Another area where you bear fruit for God is in your desire to worship. Does the idea of coming to worship get you excited or is it something you do because it feels like you're supposed to? Do you find yourself wanting to read the Bible more? Are you looking for ways to serve or to connect with other Christians? The idea is not to give you a list of things you have to do. That's religion and religion kills.

Jesus says your job is to abide in him the way a branch abides in the vine, drawing life from it. He says, "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

That word is the key to this passage. Abide. It means to live or to dwell. It means to be *with* God. Paul said it like this: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." To abide in Christ means to get our strength, our passion, our joy, our life from him. The result of abiding in Jesus is that we are cleansed, we bear much fruit, our prayers are answered, and our joy is full. This is what he means when he says, "apart from me you can do nothing." He's not saying that we can't do *anything* apart from him. What he means is that we can't do anything of value apart from him.

So here's the deal. I want you to try something with me. Every day you are awake for somewhere around 50 or 60 thousand seconds. That's 50 or 60 thousand opportunities to spend that moment with God or without God. You're going to live each of those moments no matter what. Here's the challenge. I want you to see how many of those moments you can spend each day consciously aware of God's presence. It will be hard at first. I have a hard time doing this and I work at a church! Maybe this week you find you can only do it a few times all day. Find ways to help remind you to notice God. Here's something I started doing. We have an antique clock that belonged to my great-grandparents. You have to wind it up every week and so it hadn't run in a number of years. I decided to start winding it and every fifteen minutes when it chimes I use that as a reminder to think about God. I'm not there yet. I still need a lot of work. But I'm working on it. My goal is to eventually let the ticking of each second serve as a reminder of God's presence in that moment. Life on the vine is really about small moments. You may find other ways that are helpful to you and I hope you will take the time to tell us what works for you.

The last thing we want to see is that if we are abiding in Christ then God will come along

and prune us. He will cut away those things that prevent us from producing fruit for His glory – even those things that may have been fruitful in the past. God wants to take away anything that gets in the way of our serving Him fully. Sometimes we think of that pruning as punishment. “Why is God doing this to me?” The truth is that He knows what’s best for us.

Those difficulties in life are really opportunities for you to grow in holiness. As you grow more and more into the image of Christ you will find that your desire for those things decreases. Most of all you will discover that they are replaced with a love for God and a love for other people. And then you will be fruitful.

*Amen*